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ABSTRACT

A paper by the American Council on Rural Special Education formally requests that the National Commission on Excellence in Education recognize the differences between rural and non-rural schools and provide appropriately different strategies for implementing Commission recommendations. Factors of rural schools which should be considered by policymakers are noted: rural schools include 67% of all schools and serve 33% of all school children; rural areas have higher poverty levels than non-rural areas and are rapidly growing in population without a growth in tax bases; rural schools, serve greater percentages of handicapped children, have serious staffing inadequacies, and suffer problems of isolation, high personnel attrition, and inadequate computer resources; and preservice training programs do not motivate or prepare students for rural teaching. Eight recommendations for policymakers call for recognition of diverse rural subcultures, support for innovative teacher training programs addressing areas of critical need, development of career ladders and merit pay systems designed to retain quality rural personnel, support for essential inservice training programs, adequate support for rural special education services, investigation and support for alternative service delivery systems, investigation of technological alternatives, and adequate data collection regarding the quality of rural education. (MH)

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ADDRESSING THE REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION .... FROM THE RURAL PERSPECTIVE

PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT

The American Council on Rural Special Education (ACRES) wishes to express pleasure with the intent of the Report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, A Nation at Risk. The document highlights critical issues that must be addressed if our nation's schoolchildren are to receive appropriate educational experiences.

This document formally requests that the Commission and the U. S. Department of Education recognize differences in rural and non-rural schools and provide for appropriately different strategies of implementing Commission recommendations.

FACTORS OF RURAL SCHOOLS THAT SHOULD BE CONSIDERED BY POLICY MAKERS

Rural schools (67% of all schools) and rural students (33% of all school children) experience distinct educational problems and exist in specific subcultures. Rural areas have much higher poverty levels than non-rural areas, and rural schools serve greater percentages of handicapped children (due to less prenatal and postnatal care, higher poverty rates, fewer social services available, etc.).

Rural areas are rapidly growing in population yet their tax bases are not. Even though rural schools contribute greater percentages of

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their local resources for education, rural services cost more than similar services in urban areas because of expensive transportation requirements necessary in remote/sparsely populated areas, scarce professional resources available, etc.

Serious staffing inadequacies in rural schools are particularly relevant to the recommendations in the Commission's report. Particular difficulties exist in recruiting and retaining qualified teaching and other rural educational staff, particularly those needed to work with handicapped students.

Many rural schools are forced to hire inexperienced teachers, and emergency certifications are rampant. As the preponderance of rural schools pay lower salaries, and a majority of unemployed urban teachers choose not to work in rural environments, the Commission's recommendation that superior teachers be rewarded must be carefully implemented. A majority of rural teaching staff with longevity are persons who were born and reared in the community in which they teach. They are not only more easily "recruited" but are more readily accepted by the local community. This phenomenon has positive and negative ramifications.

If the Commission's recommendation of "career ladders" for teaching staff is implemented, consideration must be given to the fact that many rural schools have only one, or a few, teaching positions. (Implications are obvious for the recommendation to develop master and lower level teaching positions.) Administrative turnover tends to be low in rural areas. Policy designers must recognize that short-term suggestions such as having "local scientists" substitute for teaching personnel would be difficult in remote rural areas having no scientific industries.

Itinerant staff, essential in sparsely populated rural areas, often travel vast distances on marginal roads, in inclement weather. This must be considered when plans are made to implement the recommendation regarding effectively using existing school time. The travel discussed above contributes to exceptionally high attrition rates, with turnover rates of 40-50% being relatively common.

Such high personnel attrition causes problems with educational program continuity and with staff development efforts. Rural administrators frequently find that their inservice efforts must continually focus on "Inservice Basics" vs. in-depth training.

As a rule, preservice training programs across the country have not uniquely prepared educators for rural settings. Nor have universities motivated students to teach in rural America. Curricular analyses have indicated that even universities with rural service areas typically do not prepare their students any differently than preparation programs with urban missions.

Plans to implement the recommendation to include computer science as part of the "Five New Basics" (a laudable objective) must consider the fact that although a majority of rural schools have a computer of some type, their computer resources are typically inadequate. For example, many schools have only one computer (used for administrative purposes). Additionally, corporate computer donation programs have thus far favored urban areas with high visibility. A majority of rural staff are not computer literate, and rural schools to date have a paucity of software for students to use.

Similar concerns must be addressed when implementing other curricular recommendations centering upon strengthening the areas of foreign language and fine and performing arts.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS

The following suggestions are offered to those designing strategies to implement the Commission's recommendations. It is emphasized that they are supplemental and reflect a rural educational context.

1. Recognition of Diverse Rural Subcultures

Rural school subcultures vary tremendously (e.g., geographically from remote islands and deserts to clustered communities; economically from stable classic farm communities to depressed lower socioeconomic settings and high growth "boom or bust" communities). Local resources are unequally distributed. Rural school environments, strengths, and weaknesses are unique, and policy recommendations must allow for this diversity.

Not only are rural environments different from non-rural environments but rural subcultures vary tremendously. Thus strategies of improving rural schools and their products (students) must be addressed in different ways than strategies addressing non-rural problems. As examples, technology will assist with problems of isolation in some communities. In others, only a highly personalized touch will be accepted. Sometimes local control is helpful, but outside intervention and assistance is often necessary to affect local problems.

2. Support for Innovative Teacher Training Programs Addressing Areas of Critical Need

The Commission's recommendation that teachers be better prepared and that the profession be made more rewarding is particularly appropos for rural America. The Federal Govern-

ment should provide grants for innovative teacher training programs, addressing areas of critical personnel shortages across the nation (e.g., rural itinerant teachers of the hearing and visually impaired).

Potential rural teachers should be educated regarding strengths, challenges and inconveniences of rural life. As numerous studies have indicated that appropriate curricular materials for rural preservice preparation are lacking, grants should be awarded to develop curriculum modules and other materials. These should deal with alternate instructional arrangements and service delivery systems (including technological), creative resource identification, working with rural professionals, and personal and professional survival skills for rural educators, particularly itinerant personnel.

Personnel preparation should include experiential training in rural schools and communities and teach personal as well as professional survival skills. Students should be exposed to rural school realities as well as "state of the art" learning situations, facilities, and equipment.

Special efforts should be made to motivate students to teach in rural areas. (Cooperation between state education agencies and universities could assist in determining positions and types of personnel needed.) University efforts should include advisement procedures designed to educate students about position surpluses and shortages.

3. Development of Career Ladders and Merit Pay Systems Designed to Retain Quality Rural Personnel

Career ladders should be designed and publicized as part

of a merit/reward structure. These advancement structures should be realistic for rural/remote school systems with few employees. (E.g., they should be part of national systems to link available positions and applicants so that career ladders are not limited to positions available in the immediate area.)

Thus policy makers must address certification issues and problems pertinent to rural areas. These include divergent certification requirements across state lines and unique certification needs of rural schools (e.g., generic vs. specialized training needs). As previously stated, recruitment of qualified personnel for rural, especially remote, areas is difficult. Many truly qualified personnel cannot be hired because of minor certification issues such as having taken an educational history course in the "wrong" state. It is essential that districts have the flexibility to hire qualified individuals for rural areas. Unique certification models designed to accommodate rural needs should be explored and those currently in practice in states such as Wisconsin should be examined. Appropriate uses of paraprofessionals and volunteers should also be investigated.

Merit pay systems should be investigated with the goal of retaining quality personnel in rural areas. Because of rural funding inadequacies mentioned earlier and because rural communities are already funding higher percentages of their school budgets from local funds than do non-rural schools, the sources of funding for merit pay will have to be addressed.

4. Support for Essential Inservice Training Programs

Because of inordinately high personnel turnover rates,

small numbers of rural personnel (who must serve general and low incidence needs), and severely limited inservice budgets in most rural schools, comprehensive inservice training must also be addressed by policy designers.

5. Adequate Support for Rural Special Education Services

Rural special education services must be better supported. This is consistent with the Commission's statement that the Federal Government, in cooperation with States and localities, should help meet the needs of key groups of students the Commission defined as "both national resources and the Nation's youth who are most at risk." Since implementation of PL94-142, there has been a 92% increase in the numbers of handicapped students identified and served in rural America. Simultaneously, the costs of educating rural handicapped students rose more significantly than the costs of educating non-rural handicapped students. Costs are exacerbated by high transportation requirements, inadequate numbers of specialized personnel available, etc. Local monies cannot adequately meet the needs.

6. Investigate and Support Alternate Service Delivery Systems

Because sparse populations are inherent in ruralness and cooperative organizational structures have been found to offer service and cost benefits, policy makers should seriously investigate ways to support intermediate educational units and to advocate support/rewards for itinerant staff. It is essential that administrators have the flexibility for shared service delivery, staff exchanges, and other aspects of interagency collaboration.

7. Investigation of Technological Alternatives

A serious investigation should occur of cost savings, efficiency, and feasibility of technologies in various rural subcultures. Emphases should include electronic communication systems and other management, instructional, and staff development applications. It would be advisable to develop a plan to motivate corporate technological gifts to rural schools. These should include donations of hardware, software and training.

8. Adequate Data Collection Regarding the Quality of Rural Education

The Federal Government should routinely and efficiently collect data so that rural vs. non-rural differences in funding and educational quality may be determined. Analyses should be feasible for even very small districts (e.g., under 300 ADA, a group about which the National Council for Educational Statistics has not previously collected data).

Respectfully Submitted,

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Education (ACRES)

Date